DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 100 788 SO 008 080

AUTHOR	Collier, David
TITLE	The Political System. SSEC Publication No. 103.
INSTITUTION	Social Science Education Consortium, Inc., Boulder, Colo.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Cooperative Research Program.
REPORT NO	SSEC-103
PUB DATE	66
NOTE	17p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Social Science Education Consortium, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302 ($0.75 prepaid)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	*American Government (Course); Citizenship Responsibility; *Concept Teaching; Decision Making; Elementary Education; Feedback; *Governmental Structure; Models; *Political Power; Political Science; *Politics; Power Structure; Secondary Education; Social Environment; Social Reinforcement; Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

The systems analysis of political life might be used as a basis for teaching about the political process in all grades, including elementary school. A political system is part of an intra-societal environment including ecological, biological, personality, economic, cultural, and other systems, all operating in society and bound by an extra-societal environment which is the sphere of relations among national societies. This system, emphasizing the relationship of the political system to its environment, is regulated by "demands," one of the two major inputs from the environment; "outputs," the decisions made by the authorities; "support" for the system, and other major input; and "feedback," a concept which unifies the whole analysis. The three basic components of the system unified by the feedback process are the political community, the regime, and the authorities. The concept of politics as a feedback system focuses on the cycle of inputs and outputs and presents the political system as a conversion process that regulates itself in order to persist. This cycle is the political function of allocating authoritatively the valued things of society, which is an order-maintaining role. This theory of the political system deals with fundamental processes and relationships rather than isolated facts. (JH)

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THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Publication #103 of the
Social Science Education Consortium

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The research reported herein was supported by the Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

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FOREWORD

This paper on The Political System was written by Mr. David Collier of the University of Chicago, under the guidance and supervision of Professor David Easton. It is a part of a curriculum project supported by a developmental contract of the United States Office of Education, made with Purdue University for the Social Science Education Consortium. The project was directed by Professor Lawrence Senesh of Purdue University. The paper follows closely, but at a simplified level, the theoretical structure of Professor Easton's work.

The overall purpose of Professor Senesh's project was to outline the major concepts, structure and methods of several of the social sciences in a way that will be useful to persons concerned with either teaching or constructing new curriculum approaches and materials in which one or more of the social science disciplines has a prominent place. Papers similar to this one on political science have been written for anthropology, geography, sociology, and political science. A somewhat more detailed, but still simplified, summary of Easton's work, written by Professor Easton, is being published as A Systems Approach to Political Life, Consortium paper #104.

Irving Morrissett

March 1966

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THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

by

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Prepared Under the Guidance and Supervision of David Easton,
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At present the high school civics and government courses are concerned largely with the structure of government, leaving the impression that government is something static, and providing little basis for comparison between governments and for understanding political change. To correct this situation, it may be helpful to incorporate certain new concepts of political science into high school courses. Indeed, perhaps the solution is to introduce some basic understandings of politics in elementary school.

This raises the question of how much children are able to understand about any kind of political activity and at what age levels learning about politics can begin in school. A study of learning about politics among elementary school children indicates, in part, the following:[1]

1. The child's learning about politics begins in the family during the pre-school years as his basic attitudes toward authority develop.

2. The first political authorities outside the family that the child becomes aware of are such figures as policemen and the President of the United States.

3. By the time children have reached second grade (age 7), most of them have become firmly attached to their country. They know they are Americans.

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[1] Easton, David, and Hess, Robert D., "The Child's Political World", Midwest Journal of Political Science. VI (1962), pp. 229-246; also,

Easton, David, and Dennis, Jack, "The Child's Image of Government", Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Vol. 361 (Sept. 1965), pp. 40-57.

Sigel, Roberta, Editor, 'Political Socialization: It's Role in the Political Process. "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 361 (September 1965).

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4. As early as second grade large numbers of children identify with one of the political parties, although familiarity with the meaning of political party does not come until fourth or fifth grade.

5. By the time the child enters high school at the age of 14, his basic political orientations to the norms, attitudes, and structures of government have become quite firmly entrenched. There is evidence that during high school little substantive change may occur in these basic orientations.

The survey thus suggests that political learning begins much earlier than has been realized, and that education in the fundamentals of political processes might begin at the elementary grade level.

A systems analysis of political life might be used as a basis for teaching about the political processes to pupils in all grades, including the primary grades.[2] This system analysis provides us with a "map" which helps us to identify the main features of political life. The diagram gives a rough idea of the relationships of the concepts in the theory, and may be referred to as we introduce new concepts.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

We must begin by distinguishing the political part of social life from other parts. Every society must perform a number of basic functions in order to survive, such as replacing of members, educating each new generation, establishing goals, providing for material needs, and maintaining order. Such familiar institutions as family, school, church, industry and agriculture, and government are among those that carry out these functions.

We are concerned here with the political system. This system includes not only the government, but all aspects of political life in society. Its function is to settle differences that cannot be resolved

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[2]This paper follows closely the work of Professor David Easton. The major presentation of Easton's theories is in his books: The Political System. New York, Alfred Knopf, 1953: A Framework for Political Analysis, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1965: and A Systems Analysis of Political Life. New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1965.

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or regulated through the private efforts of the members themselves. Through laws, Presidential actions, court decisions, and the rules of regulatory agencies the political system resolves disputes which cannot be settled informally by other institutions in the society.

To put it technically, the characteristic way in which the members of society regulate their differences politically is through the authoritative allocation of valued things for the society. In this definition, valued things means things that are desired or sought after by people in the society; allocation means distribution of these valued things; and authoritative means that people in the society accept the decisions concerning the allocations of valued things. The great number of patterns of interaction --- such as voting, parties, interest groups, administration, judiciary, legislatures --- that are more or less related to the making of binding decisions for the society (that is, the authoritative allocation of valued things) constitute a political system.

This authoritative allocation of valued things which is performed by the political system will be isolated from all other systems of interaction of the society as the focus of our concern. The remaining systems such as the ecological, biological, personality, economic, cultural, etc., which are outside the boundaries of the political system and yet are within the society, constitute the intra-societal environment of the political system. On the diagram only the social systems are indicated; these include the economic, cultural, and structural systems of a society. The line forming the outer rim of the intra-societal environment separates that environment from all the systems of activity which lie outside the given society itself (e.g., international political systems, such as NATO and the UN; and international economic systems, such as the International Monetary Fund). This outermost area is identified as the extra-societal environment, that is, the sphere of relations among national societies.

Our analysis emphasizes the relationship of the political system to its environment. We will discuss: demands, one of the two major inputs from the environment into the political system; outputs, the decisions made by the authorities; support for the political system, the

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other major input; and feedback, a concept which unifies our whole analysis.

DEMANDS

Demands are one of the two types of inputs from the environment into the political system. We do not call everything that is desired by the members of a society a political demand. The people of any society have innumerable expectations, interests, motivations, opinions, and preferences regarding the allocation of valued things within the society. We call these wants. Many of the wants arising from these differences can be satisfied by the family, educational, religious, or economic institutions in the intra-societal environment. But sometimes people cannot or do not want to satisfy their wants through the systems of which these institutions are part. They must then turn to the political system. What distinguishes a political from a non-political action is that the political action places authoritative obligations on all members of society --- obligations which are accepted as binding by most persons.

When people express the desire that any of their wants be satisfied authoritatively, wants leave the realm of private settlement and become a matter for the political process. We say that the wants have been transferred into political demands. Some examples of wants which the environment of the American political system has translated into political demands are: care for the aged, guarantees for the free exercise of civil rights, control of decent housing for low income families, equal educational opportunities for all, and assurance of income for the unemployed.

Demands can also arise within the political system itself when some procedural or structural modification is viewed as necessary for the system to continue functioning efficiently.

When the wants have been expressed in the form of demands and are ready to be considered by the authorities, they are often challenged or reconsidered by politically powerful members of the society who thereby act as gatekeepers. Gatekeepers form the key structural elements in determining what the raw materials of the political process will be; gatekeepers may be persons, groups of persons, communications media, etc., that have the opportunity, once a demand is moving through the

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political system, to determine its destiny. A list of those performing the function of gatekeepers would include various interest groups, opinion leaders, legislators, business organizations, political parties, newspapers, and so on. As a result of the actions undertaken by gatekeepers, demands may be dropped, combined, or integrated with other demands; they may undergo revision, or be converted into formal public issues.

Sometimes the overwhelming majority of the community acts as gatekeepers. In the course of U.S. history, many political demands (e.g. demands of the Utopian socialists during and following the Jacksonian period) diminished because the political community did not feel their urgency or appropriateness.

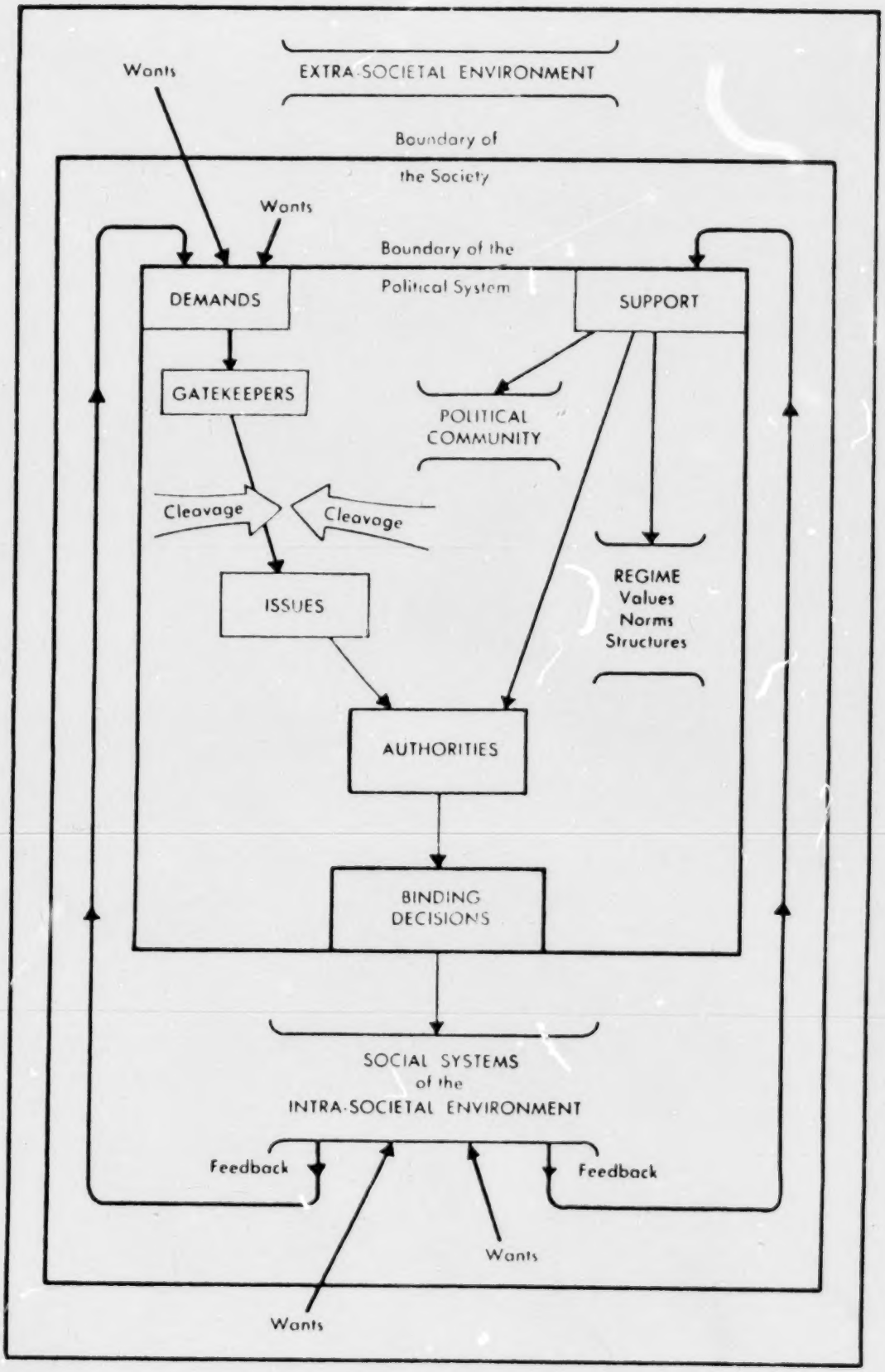
When a demand becomes an issue, members of the political community engage in serious discussion and evaluation of its merits. Cleavages, or sharp disagreements, may appear regarding an issue, and national unity may even be challenged. When opinion is divided many ways, it may become hard for the authorities to get the approval, or even the acquiescence, of a politically relevent portion of the society to any particular decision. In this case, cleavage will strain the political system.

The strain caused by cleavage can be reduced in a number of ways. Expression of diverse views may open the way for negotiation and compromise of differences. Political parties often reduce cleavage, at least within their own ranks, when they determine their policy on various issues. Appeals by the authorities to the public interest or to a sense of national unity may also be helpful. Only when cleavages regarding a controversial issue have been reduced can the authorities act on demands and make an effective decision.

In summary, we might say that demands are to the authorities what raw materials are to a factory in the process of production. From raw materials the factory produces steel, or furniture, or cars. Likewise, from the "raw material" of political demands, the authorities make political decisions. Political life as a whole may therefore be interpreted as a means whereby demands are converted into the kind of outputs we have called authoritative allocations (binding decisions).

OUTPUTS

Just as demands are a major input to the system from the


Wants
EXTRA-SOCIETAL ENVIRONMENT
Boundary of
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DEMANDS
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Feedback
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environment, so the decisions of the authorities are the outputs that affect the environment. Outputs may take the form of legislation --- by a city council, the state assembly, or by Congress; of executive orders given by a mayor, governor, or the President; decisions of courts at any level of government; regulations determined by agencies such as the Federal Trade or Interstate Commerce Commissions; actions by the Justice Department or Post Offices; or even an order by a policeman. To refer again to our factory analogy, the political outputs are like the finished products that come out of the factory. These final political decisions correspond to the furniture and cars that the factory produces.

We will have more to say about outputs at the end of our discussion, but first we must discuss support.

SUPPORT

We have said that there is another input in addition to demands. It is support. Demands are assertions of what people want from the political system. Support concerns the degree to which they approve of the system that is processing demands for them. Support exists when a person or group acts in favor of, or is favorably oriented toward, any part of the political system. Support may be externally expressed in activities connected with organizations, and in demonstrations and parades; or it may be internal, and consist of an attitude or frame of mind such as a sense of duty or loyalty. The amount of support actually given to the political system is the net balance remaining after measuring support against opposition and indifference. This level of support may fluctuate a great deal.

Fluctuations of support may subject the political system to stress in one or more of three ways: A. Cleavages may challenge the unity of the political community; B. Confidence in the particular form of political system may be undermined; or C. Members of the society may oppose the particular people in authority. These three kinds of stress suggest three major objects of political support. These are likewise the three basic components of the political system: the political community, the regime, and the authorities. People play important roles in all three areas.

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THE OBJECTS OF SUPPORT

A. The Political Community: The political community is the most inclusive group of people who share a given division of political labor. No political system can continue to operate unless its members are prepared to participate in a division of political labor through which it is possible to produce authoritative allocations of valued things. We call the group of persons who share this political division of labor in a society, the political community. In modern times the most common type of political community is the nation state. For us in the United States the political community gains its coherence from the feeling of wanting to continue together as a single unit in the political solution of our problems. The political community suffers stress when there is a drop in the level of support for it as, for example, when deep cleavages appear which cannot be resolved or reduced. The American Civil War is an example of such a cleavage. Current examples are the conflict between old tribal groups within newly emerging nations, and the wish of some French speaking people of the province of Quebec in Canada to separate Quebec from the English speaking part of the political community.

B. Regime: Regime refers to the type of political system that is shared by the political community. The regime represents expectations with regard to the range of matters that can be handled politically, the rules or norms governing the ways these matters are processed, and the powers and duties of those through whom binding decisions may be made on these matters. The regime, thus, has three components: values, norms, and structure of authority. As we discuss these components, especially the values and norms, we must keep in mind that they do not refer to something concrete the way the political community may refer to a nation state, but rather to standards of political behavior.

1. Values: Values are the broad limits with regard to what must be taken for granted in the guidance of policy if we are not to violate deep feelings of parts of the political community. Values are important because of the outer limits they impose on political action rather than because of any specific political objectives they suggest. Examples of such values in the American political system are freedom, equality of opportunity, and maximum popular participation in politics.

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No society ever achieves complete unanimity in its value system so there is always the possibility of stress occurring due to conflicting values.

2. Norms: Norms are the more specific procedures that are expected and acceptable in the processing and implementing of demands and expression of support. They concern not only the actions of the authorities, but the behavior of all members of the political system. They may be called the rules of the political game. Some norms are based on custom, such as an implicit agreement that religious differences will not be raised to the level of political conflict. Other norms have a formal, legal nature, such as those contained in the Bill of Rights and Article V of the Constitution which prescribes the procedure for constitutional amendment. Loss of support or stress may occur when there is a discrepancy between the legal and customary norms, as in the case of equality before the law, which, though a legal norm, is customarily not carried out in practice for all groups in the United States. As a result, there has been serious stress in this area that could have threatened the regime with some loss of support. A formal allocation was required on the part of the federal government which guaranteed non-discrimination in education, public facilities, and voting.

3. Structure of Authority: The structure of authority specifies the roles and relationships through which power and authority are distributed and exercised. It is the form of the government. Such alternatives as presidential versus parliamentary systems, alternative kinds of civil service systems, and the relation of the armed forces to political power are included in focus here. A typical example of collapse of support for the structure of authority is the alternating disillusionment in France with parliamentary and single-ruler (non presidential) systems.

In the United States, many issues are raised concurrently that challenge the structure of authority; e.g. the debates of the political community concerning the quasi-legislative power of the Supreme Court, the independent policy of the Federal Reserve System, the role of the President's Economic Council as a partisan body, and the power of the Executive to make unilateral decisions.

C. Authorities: The most concrete component in the political system is that of the authorities. They are the men who occupy the roles established in the structure of authority. They govern. They must be

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able to mobilize enough support for themselves to have the power and authority to formulate and implement decisions they make. Stress for the authorities may consist of the refusal by some portion of the society to accept their right to rule. The right of Congress to impeach the President of the United States is an example.

Political community, regime (consisting of values, norms, and structure of authority), and authorities are thus the basic components of the political system. In discussing support, we must always consider what part of the system is being supported or stressed through erosion of support. Likewise, when we speak of the problem of persistence of a political system, we do not think only in terms of the extreme alternatives of no change at all versus complete breakdown that leads to the collapse of society. Rather, we consider persistence as a separate, though related problem for each component of the political system.

Now that the objects which must be supported have been described, and examples given of possible stress for each object, we can specify two kinds of support that underpin the authorities, regime and political community. Specific Support is generated when outputs are perceived by members of the political system as meeting their demands. Their immediate satisfaction results in specific support. This support is generally directed to the authorities, though in addition it may overflow from them to the regime and the political community. Thus, if people are regularly satisfied with what a government does, we can assume that they will not be inclined to withdraw their support from the form of the political system (regime) or from the group with whom they are sharing their political labor (the political community).

Diffuse Support is not based on the satisfaction of particular demands, but rather it is built up out of a general feeling of goodwill towards the political system. Regardless of what specific and identifiable benefits a member may feel he gets out of a political system, he may develop a generally favorable disposition toward it. Patriotism, loyalty or attachment roughly express the kind of sentiment referred to here. These feelings tend more to be directed to the community and regime though from there they may overflow into the authority level.

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Diffuse support is very important when the authorities must make decisions that are unpopular, not only in a time of war, famine, or other national disaster, but on a day-to-day basis in the form, for example, of unwanted taxes or forms of regulated behavior. But though diffuse support is not tied to particular outputs, a long period of output failure may stress it. In the face of such stress the authorities may seek to generate goodwill by (1) instilling a deep sense of legitimacy, showing that they hold office and make decisions within the norms and structure set forth in the regime; (2) invoking symbols such as the flag or national anthem to stimulate in the members feelings of loyalty, or (3) strengthening the degree of identification by members of the system with the political community through an awareness of some common interest of the society.

FEEDBACK

Now that we have discussed support, we are ready to return to outputs, and unify our whole conception of the political system by discussing outputs in terms of feedback. If a political system is to function normally, most members will have to accept the outputs of the authorities most of the time. Except in cases of coercion this acceptance requires a fairly high level of support, which in turn depends on the quality of previous outputs; we must remember that even diffuse support will lapse if there is output failure over a long period. We must note an important circularity here. Effective outputs depend on support which depends on effective outputs which depends on support, etc.

This circularity brings us to the central dynamic concept of our analysis, feedback. When we say that the political system is a feedback system, we mean that it is self-regulating. It is a system that produces outputs in response to an input, a demand, and includes the results of its own previous outputs in the calculations by which it determines its subsequent outputs. This means that political life forms a kind of system of behavior that can learn from experience. If a system responds to a demand with a particular output and the demand continues, it may learn through information fed back to the authorities that the original output was inadequate and it may try another one. By considering the successes or failures of its own action through feedback the authorities acting for a system can shape its outputs with reference not only to

present demands, but also with reference to how well previous outputs have satisfied such demands. The concept of feedback means that the political system need not be passive in the face of change in its environment. It adapts to change, and can thereby persist in the face of change.

The feedback loop on the diagram is indicated by the line leading from "Binding Decisions" to "Social Systems" and, through "Wants", back to "Demand", at which point the political process begins again. This feedback loop represents the idea that each new output is made not only as a response to a single demand but to a whole previous cycle of inputs and outputs and possibly even many such cycles.

Over a period of time it is possible to see changes in the political system which result from feedback. During the Great Depression, reliance on market forces to reestablish a fully employed economy proved inadequate. The measures which Congress passed in the hope of correcting the situation proved ineffective. More radical measures were demanded. The demands to stimulate agriculture, business, and industry, and the demand from the federal government to create work for the unemployed challenged not only the administration (authorities) but also the norms, values, and the structures on which our political system has been based. The feedback process of the 1930's resulted in a change in the power relationship between local, state, and federal governments.

The conception of politics as a feedback system focuses our attention on the great cycle of inputs and outputs. It allows us to see the political system as a vast <u>conversion process</u> that regulates itself in order to persist. And this idea of persistence brings us back to the function of the political system: to regulate conflict in society by authoritatively allocating valued things over which there would be uncontrolled dispute. Beyond making such allocations at a particular point in time, it is clearly the function of the political system to persist in its order-maintaining role as long as the society itself persists, and even to help prolong the life of the society through its own persistence. Our conception of political life as a feedback process focuses our attention on this basic persistence problem.

The task of the schools, it is reasonable to suggest, is to emphasize fundamental processes and relationships rather than isolated, separate facts. If, as shown earlier in this article, students are indeed ready for the study of political life at a much earlier age than has previously been thought to be the case, then this theory of the political system may offer a useful coherent and systematic theoretical basis for the presentation of political materials in the elementary school.